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ABSTRACT

The term "visual literacy" generally refers to the interpretation of the formal structure of film or television and carries with it the notion that the interpreter has knowledge of the use of camera angles, lighting, flashbacks, and so forth. However, many visual conventions encountered in movies or television may be interpreted even by a "naive" viewer with no previous experience in media conventions with the use of general cognitive skills. For example, when seeing a character filmed from a low camera angle, even naive viewers can understand that the character is meant to appear powerful because viewers are accustomed to looking up to powerful people. Similarly, viewers' cognitive skills let them interpret subjective and objective shots as the camera switches from a character's point of view to a view of the scene itself. Finally, viewers are sensitive to contextual cues in nonverbal communication, so that when shots of a character's face are intercut with shots of an object of interest or a listener's face, viewers can perceive nuances of meaning by the juxtaposed images. Both "reality" and exposure to film or television are potential avenues to the interpretation of visual cues, and both sources of interpretational competence conceivably work together, interacting in a complex fashion to help viewers understand what they see. (Twelve references are included.) (JC)

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THE ROLE OF VISUAL 'LITERACY' IN FILM COMMUNICATION

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THE ROLE OF VISUAL 'LITERACY' IN FILM COMMUNICATION

I am using the term "visual literacy" to refer to the notion that the interpretation of film or television -- more precisely, of the formal structure of a movie or TV program -- depends on prior familiarity with a set of formal conventions (i.e., the conventional uses and meanings of such things as close-ups, point-of-view shots, slow motion, flashbacks, etc.). I think it's fair to say that this notion is accepted almost axiomatically by most people who have written or thought about the issue (cf. Carey, 1982; Worth, 1981). Although such people are often quite sensitive to the dangers of overstating possible analogies between visual media and language, the specific analogy implied by the notion of visual "literacy" -- the idea that competent visual interpretation presupposes a type of learning which is comparable to the learning of a language -- is typically not treated as a controversial assumption. Nonetheless, this paper is based on the premise that this standard view of visual interpretation probably does overstate the similarity between visual media and language in this area. Specifically, I shall argue that many visual conventions routinely encountered in movies or TV programs may be interpretable even by a "naive," first-time viewer with no previous experience of these media.

This point can be argued on both empirical and theoretical grounds. My aim in this paper is exclusively theoretical, but it is worth mentioning that the available empirical evidence

indicates that at least two of the most crucial production variables -- changes in camera-to-subject distance; changes in point of view -- do not pose any significant interpretational problems to inexperienced viewers (Messaris, 1982). In other words, there is evidence that, for some visual conventions at least, general cognitive skills -- skills whose application must extend beyond the range of film and television and which a viewer could be expected to have even before his/her first encounter with these media -- may serve as a basis for interpretation. My primary purpose in this paper is to spell out what some of these cognitive skills might be. Specifically, I want to discuss the following three types, which I consider to be central components of a competent viewer's repertory: (a) analogical thinking -- the ability to perceive a formal analogy between a visual device and some aspect of everyday experience; (b) spatial intelligence -- the ability to derive a coherent sense of a three-dimensional scene out of a limited number of partial views of that scene; (c) sensitivity to contextual information in the interpretation of nonverbal behavior. In discussing these cognitive skills, I shall be developing a theoretical account of visual interpretation which differs from the more traditional, "visual-literacy" approach. This is not to say that the two approaches are totally incompatible. In fact, I shall describe ways in which they might complement each other. However, to the extent that the approach I am suggesting offers a valid interpretation of the viewing process, one of the main

implications of the "visual-literacy" approach -- the idea that comprehension of film and television requires extensive previous exposure -- will have to be revised.

(a) Analogical Thinking. One of the clearest examples of a formal convention which is encountered very widely in both film and television is that of the use of camera angle as a means of making someone look powerful or powerless. In other words, what I'm referring to is the well-know principle of using a low camera angle -- shooting from below -- to make the person in the shot appear more powerful (or menacing, threatening, etc., depending on the exact context); and, conversely, using a high camera angle -- shooting from above -- to make the person in the shot appear weaker, etc. I would assume that even someone with no formal background in film or TV scholarship would readily recognize this convention, since it is, as indicated, in very wide use. Now, the question that I am interested in is this: How does the viewer come to understand this convention when he or she sees it in a film or TV program? What previous knowledge or experience must the viewer have in order to be able to respond to this use of camera angle in the appropriate manner (and, when I say appropriate, I mean: as called for by the convention)?

The standard response to this question would be that the viewer would have to have had a number of previous encounters with this use of camera angle, in the course of which he or she would gradually -- or maybe not so gradually -- have acquired a sense of this device's meaning. For example, we may imagine a

child gradually coming to associate low angles with shots of villains in threatening postures and thereafter responding to the angle in and of itself in the appropriate way. This certainly seems like a plausible possibility, and, in fact, I'm sure that it does indeed happen to a certain extent.

At the same time, however, it seems to me that there is an alternative route to the interpretation of this kind of use of camera angle -- and, if I am correct, this alternative route would not require any previous exposure to this specific device. This alternative route is based on the fact -- or, what I would argue is the fact -- that the camera-angle convention is not an arbitrary convention (in other words, it's not like the word "powerful," whose form is unrelated to the concept it denotes); instead, I would argue that the particular use of camera angle which we've been examining derives its meaning by analogy with real-life situations of looking up at powerful people or looking down at weak people (cf. Schwartz, 1981) -- a realm of experience that is likely to be particularly relevant to the formative years of childhood. If this assumption is correct, its implication is that a viewer should be able to respond appropriately to camera angle on the basis of the analogy with real-life experience, without any necessary previous exposure to the use of camera angle in film or television. In other words, here we have an example of a formal device which may be interpretable on the basis of a general cognitive skill, namely, sensitivity to visual analogy -- or, perhaps, even more

generally, aptitude in analogical thinking. This alternative possibility does not preclude the more standard approach, and, in fact, it seems quite possible that general sensitivity to visual analogy may develop from the specific experience of camera angle and other similar conventions. Nevertheless, as interpretational mechanisms, these two alternatives are certainly distinct.

While camera angle may be one of the clearest examples of a device which draws on analogy for its meaning, in my view it is certainly not the only one. Indeed, I would argue that the use of analogical constructions is one of the distinctive features of film and television as modes of communication. Let me list, very briefly, some other formal conventions whose meaning appears to derive from analogy with some aspect of real-life experience. At a minimum, such a list would include the following: camera-to-subject distance (i.e., the use of close-up vs. medium shot, etc.) as a means of emphasis or as a means of generating intimacy and identification with a character on the screen (as Meyrowitz [1986] has argued in an extended analysis of this variable, it appears to derive its meaning and its effectiveness from an analogy to the real-life area of proxemic behavior); the use of camera movement to simulate a character's subjective visual experience in point-of-view shots; framing a shot so as to magnify the size of important characters or objects; rapid cutting as a method of increasing the impact of action sequences; "Eisensteinian" editing, in which objects are juxtaposed on the basis of conceptual analogy (e.g., the famous example, from

Eisenstein's Strike, of massacred strikers juxtaposed with animals in a slaughterhouse).

(b) Spatial Intelligence. As the above list indicates, the scope for analogical thinking in the interpretation of film and television appears to be quite extensive. However, in my view, the cognitive skill which is of greatest importance to film or TV interpretation is probably not analogical thinking but, rather, spatial intelligence. As conceived of by cognitive psychologists (e.g., see Gardner, 1983), spatial intelligence comprises a cluster of related cognitive abilities, of which the most crucial, for our purposes, is the ability to derive a coherent sense of a three-dimensional scene out of a limited number of partial views of that scene. Anyone familiar with cognitive psychology will recognize here an area of intelligence which is typically tapped through such measures as Piaget's three-mountain task: A child is shown a certain view of a mountainous landscape and asked to indicate how the mountains would appear from a different viewing position. Although I do not think that this specific situation has an exact parallel in film or TV interpretation, the general skill of spatial integration on the basis of partial views is brought into play every time the action in a scene is "interrupted" by a cut from one point of view to another. Of course, such transitions need not be extreme. Often, all that is involved is a small reorientation of the camera back and forth between two people having a conversation. On the other hand, when it comes to action sequences, or such

things as a switch from an "objective" view to a "subjective" shot (i.e., the point of view of a character in the scene itself) the change in point of view can be quite radical -- and, presumably, quite demanding with regard to the viewer's spatial intelligence.

As I have indicated, I think that spatial intelligence may be the most important component of a competent viewer's intepretational abilities. This judgment is based on an analysis of the kinds of editing which a viewer is likely to encounter in typical fictional TV programs. We examined a convenience sample of nine TV programs: three daytime soap operas, three sit-coms, and three police/adventure shows. Our analysis was concerned with the editing. We looked at each shot transition (cut, fade-out/fade-in, dissolve, etc.) and classified them into five overall categories, of which the only one which is relevant for our purposes was the first: a transition <u>within a single location, from one point of view to another</u>. Overall, an average of ninety-five percent of the transitions fell into this category. (Average N for total transitions = 559 for soap operas; 250 for sit-coms; 398 for detective shows.) In other words, by an overwhelming majority, the kind of editing transition which a viewer is likely to be confronted with in a typical fictional TV program is precisely the kind of transition for which spatial intelligence is the relevant interpretational skill. All the other editing devices -- time/space changes, flashbacks, etc. -- (which sometimes seem to get the lion's

share of attention from scholars) are in fact a tiny minority of the whole.

The relevance of spatial intelligence to film or TV viewing has received considerable attention from cognitive psychologists, and there are several studies suggesting or demonstrating a link between TV experience and performance on Piagetian or other tests of this cognitive skill (e.g., Salomon, 1979; Tidhar, 1984; Wachtel, 1984). A review of this research is beyond the scope of this presentation, but the general finding -- namely, that TV viewing can influence spatial intelligence -- suggests a two-sided conclusion to what has been said so far: On the one hand, the major thrust of this presentation has been to argue that, when certain cognitive skills precede film or TV experience, they can provide an avenue to interpretation in the absence of specific familiarity with the formal conventions of these media. On the other hand, to the extent that spatial intelligence -- and perhaps other cognitive skills -- are developed further through the viewing experience itself, we can say that competence in film or TV interpretation is actually a form of more general intelligence.

(c) Sensitivity to Contextual Cues in Nonverbal Communication. The creation of a coherent space/time continuum out of the fragments presented in a movie or TV program is one of the central intellectual tasks which visual media demand of their viewers. However, the point of editing is not always that of linking time frames and points of view. A second major purpose

-- especially in dramatic contexts -- is that of revealing characters' thoughts, intentions, and personalities. This possibility was one of the earliest discoveries in the history of explicit theorizing about the movies. Its formulation is usually associated with Lev Kuleshov and other filmmakers working during the early years of Soviet cinema. In its best-known incarnation, the so-called "Kuleshov effect" is illustrated in Kuleshov's experiment involving an "expressionless" close-up of the Russian actor Mozhukhin juxtaposed with a variety of other scenes, including a plate of soup on a table, a corpse in a coffin, and a little girl playing with a toy bear. According to Kuleshov's colleague V.I. Pudovkin, to whom we owe the description of this experiment, viewers who saw these sequences without having been told about the editing responded with enthusiastic praise for Mozhukhin's acting. In other words, the editing led these viewers to see subtle changes in expression -- from thoughts of food to deep sorrow to a "light, happy smile" -- where in fact there were none (Pudovkin, 1976, p. 168).

The general category of juxtapositions explored in this experiment (and others which followed it) is a firmly established feature of film and TV editing, occurring most commonly, perhaps, in the conventional "reaction-shot" sequence, in which shots of a speaker or other object of interest are intercut with shots of a listener or observer. Such sequences are a typical ingredient of dialogue scenes in fiction films, as well as of "non-fictional" dialogues in talk shows and other TV programs, but the potential

role of image juxtaposition as an indicator of characters' thoughts or reactions is probably most evident in the absence of dialogue and in those "non-fictional" cases in which a certain sequence of events in rearranged through editing (as in the many instances in which an interviewer's "reactions" are inserted into a TV interview after the fact). Assuming, as the evidence suggests, that viewers typically do use the juxtaposition of images -- rather than just the facial expressions in them -- as clues to what lies "beneath the surface" of characters' faces, we are confronted with another cluster of visual conventions based on a single general principle. What might account for viewers' ability to make sense of these conventions?

One possibility, as always, is that entailed in the notion of visual "literacy," namely, previous experience with the conventions in question. On the other hand, this is an area in which a ready parallel with a set of "real-life" cognitive skills suggests itself. Although the precise visual sequence which the viewer is confronted with on the screen -- a view of a character juxtaposed with a view of some object or situation of interest to that character -- may not have an <u>exact</u> parallel in reality, the basic inferential task which the viewer has to perform in the case of the film or TV sequence is similar to an extremely common real-life task, namely, that of judging other people's intentions from the context of their behavior. The degree to which this process is central to interpersonal communication bears some emphasis. As researchers in the areas of nonverbal communication

and of person perception have noted, people's appearance, expressions, and actions are frequently ambiguous, or even completely opaque, in the absence of information about the objects or situations to which they are addressed. Indeed, Birdwhistell (1970) has argued that no facial expression or gesture has a determinate meaning out of context. The ability to take context into account in inferring thoughts and assessing intentions is consequently a vital component of any mature person's social skills. It is conceivable, therefore, that this ability -- rather than any direct experience with editing conventions -- may serve as the basis of the interpretational competence called for by the kinds of editing we are concerned with here.

This notion -- that the "Kuleshov effect" and related cinematic devices are derivatives of the real-life dependence of meaning on context -- is consistent with the implications of another, less widely known, experiment by the Russian filmmaker. In this experiment, Kuleshov filmed an actor in two roles: first, in a jail cell, as a famished prisoner being offered a bowl of soup; second, as a prisoner released from jail and taken out into the open air. The actor was invited to use every means at his disposal to express the sentiments appropriate to these two situations: on the one hand, craving for the soup; on the other, delight at the sight of birds, clouds, the sun. Then Kuleshov produced various versions of the two scenes, in some of which the shots of the actor were transposed from one scene to

the other. By his own account, regardless of how the scenes were scrambled, viewers were unable to detect any discrepancy in the actor's performance (Kuleshov, 1974, p. 54). In other words, despite the fact that the actor had a clear and distinct sentiment in mind in each case, his facial expressions in themselves were apparently incapable of conveying a specific enough sense of his thoughts, and the viewers' ultimate interpretations were evidently fixed by the overall context. This is essentially the point which investigators of "real-life" social perception have made about the information available in facial expressions and other overt indicators of thought and intention. Unlike the more famous Kuleshov experiment mentioned earlier, whose use of an unvarying, "neutral" expression might be seen as somewhat artificial, this one is based on a closer approximation of "real-life" conditions -- in the sense that the actor's performance was allowed to vary with the situation -- and it therefore makes the potential relationship between "real life" and this aspect of movie viewing clearer.

As this discussion suggests, then, both "reality" and exposure to film or television are potential avenues to the interpretation of the kinds of visual devices we have been considering. One possibility does not necessarily exclude the other, of course. It is conceivable that these two sources of interpretational competence might work together, either by reinforcing each other or by interacting in a more complex fashion. For example, previous exposure to editing might teach a

viewer which juxtapositions of images to look at for psychological implications, while "real-life" social experience might guide the actual inferences drawn from those juxtapositions. In the absence of research aimed specifically at disentangling these possibilities -- for example, a study of "naive" adult viewers' susceptibility to the "Kuleshov effect" -- it is unclear that one can be more specific about either the necessary preconditions of these aspects of visual interpretation or the typical mix of experiences leading to them. However, what we can say is that, to the extent that the connections which have been drawn here between general (real-life) cognitive skills and visual conventions are valid, the interpretation of these conventions should be at least partially accessible even to an inexperienced, first-time viewer.

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